



Exploring the Exeter Ship Canal

The Exeter Ship Canal is a long way from the main network, but predates it by over 450 years. **Andrew Denny** travels the 5-mile route

Above: *Pride of Exmouth* passes through the Countess Wear lift- and swing-bridges.

Tucked away on the edge of the West Country, miles from the main network, the Exeter Ship Canal is a remarkable survivor. The oldest canal in the country, it predates Brindley's Bridgewater and the Sankey Canal by over two centuries. It opened in 1566, and is still intact, running for 5 miles from the sea to the city.

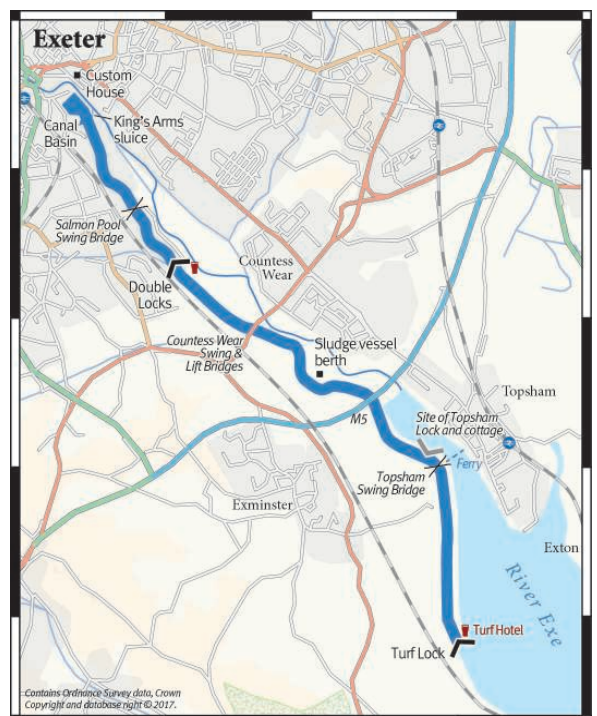
So why is it so little boated? It's a question exercising the minds of the waterway's owners, Exeter City Council, and the new Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, founded last year in the wake of its 450th anniversary celebrations.

Last month we reported on how the council, although struggling with the cost of maintaining it, rejected an option to hand it over to the Canal & River Trust due to its own commitment to restoring it as a destination for seagoing vessels.

EXPLORING THE ROUTE Down Quay Hill

The easiest way to see the Exeter Canal is on foot or bicycle from the city centre. Descending down Quay Hill your first encounter is not with the canal itself, but the River Exe. It sweeps around a bend under a cliff, which keeps the city separate from its waterway.

The town quay remains fairly unspoiled, a charming holdover from Georgian and Victorian England, with pubs converted from warehouses, arched warehouses built into the cliffs and fine ship-managers' buildings.



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The glorious showpiece is Custom House, an immaculate mansion built in 1681 and once the town's most important building at a time when government revenues largely came from customs tariffs. It is now a fascinating museum to the industry of its time.

To reach the canal itself, you'll have to cross the river – either by the modern footbridge of 1988 or (in summer) Butt's Ferry, a quaint chain ferry whose origins go back 800 years and which is still run on behalf of the council.

Canal basin

At Exeter Basin, the canal proper begins. While a few old buildings remain, it's no longer a dramatic Victorian stage set, like, say, Gloucester Docks. New residential developments in a pastiche warehouse-style nestle among the remaining old buildings, which have found modern uses as antique shops, studios, restaurants and cafés. There's also a watersports shop that feeds the popular canoeing, rowing and kayaking centres, which make up most of the boat traffic on the canal.

Seeing small yachts and assorted paddleboats here, it's hard to imagine that this was once a major inland port. The old quays were widely known in the 1970s through the TV series *The Onedin Line*, and as late as the 1960s oil was delivered here in 300-ton coaster tankers.

Now the boats are greatly outnumbered by the cyclists, and the towpath is a major commuting route to the village suburbs of Topsham and Exminster.

The first road swing-bridge comes half a mile from the basin. The second landmark is a further half-mile on, at Double Locks. The name is a misnomer – it's only a single lock, but a very large one. Indeed, it's perhaps unique on the waterways, with a lock chamber that is at least as wide as the main channel.

But Double Locks is probably better known to locals as the name of the adjacent pub. This is one of the canal's glories, a sprawling building dating back to the building of the lock itself in 1827, and hugely popular in summer.

Twin bridges

The towpath continues, on both sides, down to a second unique landmark – the twin bridges of

Above: **Topsham Lock Cottage.** The lock, now derelict, was built at the insistence of the operators of Topsham Quay to provide access for their cargo to reach Exeter. The pretty cottage is rented out in the winter and operated as a café in the summer.

Below left: **The Turf Hotel at Turf Lock marks the entrance to the canal.** Below right: **The M5 motorway bridge is the only permanent obstruction, but it is tall enough for all but the biggest sailing masts.**

HISTORY

The origins of the Exeter, Britain's first modern canal (in the sense of a waterway complete with pound locks), goes back to the rivalries of mediaeval times, and particularly the wool trade.

The River Exe was navigable to Exeter, at least at high tide, until 1284. It was in this year that the citizens of Topsham, a couple of miles downstream of the town, built the first weir across the river to divert trade to their own port. Over 200 years of competition followed before Exeter gained permission for the first short canal, bypassing its rival.

In 1563, an early engineer, John Trew of Glamorganshire, was engaged to build a canal that would run alongside the river and rejoin it below the weirs. This first canal was completed by 1566 at a cost of £5,000 – a sum raised by the City Corporation of the time. The city paid, and has owned it ever since.

Trew built a quay beneath the city walls, a new weir just downstream to raise water levels, and a new entrance lock: the King's Sluice. There was no canal basin as it is now. This initial canal, only 2 miles long, ran down to Matford Brook, just below the area still known as Countess Wear. Here it rejoined the river, bypassing Topsham's own obstructions. The canal also included three locks with vertical guillotine sluice gates, and a single pair of gates at the seaward end.

A century later the canal was dredged, widened, deepened, and extended a further half-mile downstream to a sea lock.

The barge canal had become a ship canal, and on its back, Exeter became the fourth largest port in England.

From 1700 the canal was deepened and widened still further. Trew's three guillotine locks were replaced by what became the huge 'Double Locks' that allowed large ships to pass.

In 1821 Thomas Telford proposed that the canal should be extended a further 2 miles down the estuary to Turf, deepened to 14ft and with a full ship basin built at the city end.

This final canal opened in 1827 and the basin in 1830. The burghers of Topsham, fearing they would be even more isolated, sponsored an Act to insist on a side lock from the river to the canal, opposite the old port. This was finished by September 1832. Little used from the start, it still stands, derelict, as a testament to old port rivalries.

Trade on the canal quickly declined with the coming of the railways. Yet occasional commercial traffic continued into the 1960s. The last working boats carried sewage sludge which was dumped out at sea until this practice was banned in 1997.





CUSTOM HOUSE

One of the heritage glories of the canal is Custom House on the Town Quay. Built in 1680, it is said to be the oldest such building in the country, and dates from a time, pre-income tax, when duties on trade were

the government's main source of income. Erected in a prime position, at the bend of the River Exe, it now serves as a fine museum of the canal and the wool industry that was the foundation of the city's wealth.



Countess Wear. Nowhere else is there a swing-bridge and a lift-bridge alongside each other.

The swing-bridge dates back to the 1930s, while the lift-bridge was installed in 1972. It was a compromise solution to speeding up the traffic on the old A38 route to Plymouth, before the building of the M5 viaduct.

It's this odd pairing that has created the serious obstruction to boat traffic. Nominally, one can be swung, one can be lifted, both at the same time, so what's the problem?

The answer is that the A38 here is a critical commuting route. Stopping the traffic has to be planned, usually causes long traffic jams and is said to cost the council anything up to £800 a time (in administration as much as working costs). The cost has to be recovered, and few boaters want to pay that for a single passage.

Replacing the pair with a single lift- or swing-bridge would be hugely expensive, while a new (higher) bridge to provide sufficient clearance would be even more impractical. The new Friends have suggested a drop lock as a solution.

Further south, the canal passes the South West Water treatment plant. The wharf here was the source of the last commercial canal traffic, with sewage carried out to sea by the barge *Countess Wear*.

The final big landmark on the canal is the most recent: the M5 viaduct. Built as recently as 1977, and the only bridge to restrict headroom, it nevertheless requires only the tallest of sailboats to lower their masts. It's not really a barrier, but it is a bit of an eyesore.

Final mile

There are few greater unexpected delights on the Exeter Ship Canal than Topsham Lock Cottage. In the dusk you half-expect to find Little Red Riding Hood waiting outside for her grandmother. The cottage has been beautifully restored, and somehow the dereliction of the adjacent lock only seems to enhance it. In the summer it's a café, while in the winter the owner rents it out for short lets.

There is one more swing-bridge, present as little more than access to Topsham Ferry, before the canal enters its final stretch.

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There is now a truly coastal air. The flatland floodplain on the western side is the RSPB nature reserve of Exminster Marshes, while the other side has the mud flats of the Exe Estuary, which is always full of seabirds.

Soon the masts of moored sailboats appear as you near Turf Lock. This is the sea lock, and marks the end of this short, elegant waterway.

The Turf Hotel was once the lock-keeper's cottage, one of three (Topsham and Double Locks being the others). Since 1990 it has been a seasonal pub, open only from March to September, and it remains one of the most distinctive on the waterways, accessible only to boaters, cyclists and walkers. Indeed, when *WW* asked our contributors to list their favourite waterside watering holes last month, the Turf was a strong candidate for more than one of our number.

Standing in the garden of the Turf Hotel, looking down the widening Exe Estuary, you can only wonder when the next boat will arrive to cruise up the Exeter Ship Canal.

The answer, almost every day, is 'not today'. Until the twin barriers of Countess Wear Bridge can be sorted out, reaching the town basin by boat will be difficult for most people without high cost and complicated paperwork.

Nevertheless, it's still possible to cruise the canal as a passenger. Seven times a year, Exmouth cruise company Stuart Lines Cruises takes its flagship *Pride of Exmouth* on a return day-trip along the canal.

Top left: **The majestic Custom House of 1681.**

Top: **The King's Sluice, the original destination of the canal, and the route to the quay opposite. Above left: The Double Locks pub is probably the most popular destination on the canal.**

Above middle: **The canal basin, still thick with boats, though it remains quiet.**

Above: **Old warehouses in the canal basin.**

MORE INFORMATION

Friends of Exeter Ship Canal

Formed in 2016 to coincide with the 450th anniversary celebrations of the canal, it held its first work party in January 2017. friendsofexetershipcanal.co.uk.

Boating the canal

Stuart Line Cruises, the sea excursion company at Exmouth, runs occasional Saturday return trips from Exmouth to Exeter Canal Basin using its large boat

Pride of Exmouth.

These are the company's most popular trips and tend to sell out in advance. See the timetable and seat availability at stuartlinecruises.co.uk/exeter-canal.